INTEROPERABILITY

New Group Can Make Internet a Global Village

A new professional society is being born as we speak. Vinton Cerf is stepping down as chair of the Internet Activities Board to act as father and mother, midwife and nanny.

The role of nanny is not a new one for Dr. Cerf. As chair of the IAB he has helped lead the evolution of the Internet from the early days, including guiding the often raucous group of engineers that make up the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). The most important outgrowth of this newly forming Internet Society will be to give an institutional home to the IETF, the IAB, and the other bodies that steer that amorphous creature, the Internet.

In the early days, the Defense Department funded and controlled the Arpanet. They appointed a group of experts to guide the evolution of the increasingly complex, fast-growing network. This group, which evolved into today's IAB, controlled the requests for comments and the series of documents that include the standards (and many non-standards) defining the TCP/IP protocol suite.

While the Arpanet died, the Internet evolved into a much more nebulous collection of networks. The IAB kept on promulgating standards, but no longer reported to the Defense Department (although Defense program managers continued to be supportive in funding the process). Instead, the IAB ruled by moral authority, relying on its technical leadership to persuade thousands of constituent networks to heed its word.

The IAB learned early on that it could not do everything itself, so they spawned research and engineering task forces. Since then the IETF has grown to more than several hundred active participants.

The IETF and the IAB are notable in their concern for the technical details of the standards. Although politics occasionally creep in, the focus is on making things that work. The results have been impressive, spawning the alphabet hall of fame that includes SNMP, SMTP, OSPF, BGP, PEM, and many others.

They've been successful, but they've been homeless. The IETF is the engineering arm of the IAB. The IAB reports to no one. This lack of accountability can only lead eventually to a lack of legitimacy.

Enter the Internet Society, which has been designed as an international, professional society run by its members. It will sponsor the IAB and the IETF. It will publish a journal and a newsletter. It will host the annual INET conferences, including the June conference in Kobe, Japan. It will run a certification hierarchy for Privacy Enhanced Mail and help administer the name system.

We badly need such a group. Properly formulated, the Internet Society can guide the Internet from being a benevolent technocracy into a truly international global village.

The key to its success will be the ability of its founders, like Vinton Cerf, to make themselves accountable to the membership. The Internet Society is its members. The more open the society is, the more important will be the role of the Internet Society. ■

CARL MALAMUD'S NEXT BOOK IS 'EXPLORING THE INTERNET: A TECHNICAL TRAVELOGUE,' WHICH WILL BE PUBLISHED BY PRENTICE HALL AND WILL BE FEATURED AT INTEROP '92 FALL. THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED HERE ARE HIS OWN.

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